A FAMILY AFFAIR.

BY HUGH CONWAY.

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(Continued From Sunday, May 31st.)

"We lost a little boy," she faltered out, "a dear little boy of that age. My man is certain this is ours."

"But you—you are not certain. A man may make a mistake as to his own child, but not a woman. The mother does not forget her child, or believe the child of a stranger to be her own."

"My man is so certain," repeated Mrs. Rawlings, "he must be right. Poor fellow, ever since our boy was lost he has been seeking him, high and low. It has driven him all but mad at times. Now he has found the child, and means to have him." She spoke the last sentence somewhat defiantly.

"He will never have him," said Beatrice, slowly. "Listen to me. There is no chance of your obtaining that boy. His mother knows in whose hands he is. If your claim is pressed, proof as to whose the child really is will be forthcoming. The production will cause pain and grief, but that will be borne, if needful. See here"—she drew from her pocket the label which had been cut off the child's cape—"the person who has a right to that child must produce the half of the card which fits this. When wanted it can be produced."

"I know nothing about cards and proofs," said the woman, whose understanding could not, perhaps, grasp the ingenuity of the device. "All I know is this, miss: my husband swears it is our boy, and I believe him, poor man. Sore enough he has grieved for two years—never been the same man since."

"You do not believe him," said Beatrice, in the same deliberate way, "but for the sake of setting his mind at rest you humor his delusion, and are willing to rob another woman. You seem to be a kind woman, yet you are ready to work irretrievable harm to another."

"I mean no harm to any one, miss. If it shouldn't be my child, the mother can't be of much account who could desert a pretty little dear like that. But there, I've listened too long, and perhaps said more than I ought. If you like to see my husband, I'll send for him."

Mrs. Rawlings rose as if to terminate the audience. Beatrice also rose and faced her. She threw up her veil, and for the first time during the interview showed her face to her companion.

"No," she said, with strange vehemence; "I have more, much more to say to you. Look me in the face, and feel sure that I am speaking the truth. What if I tell you that I know the mother of this child—know why it was sent to Hazlewood House—know that if forced to do so the mother will claim it publicly — will face whatever the shame, rather than yield it to another? Will these things have weight with you, and make you persuade your husband to let the matter rest?"

Her impassioned manner had its effect upon her listener. Mrs. Rawlings fidgeted about, and her round eyes, which hitherto had rested wonderingly on Beatrice's face, were cast down.

"It's no use," she muttered, shaking her head. "Not a bit of use. He has set his heart on the boy. He'll say it's only a trick."

"Then I have yet more to say. Look at me again, and listen. Put yourself in my place, and realize what you compel me to do. I tell you the child is mine—it is mine. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Rawlings shook her head feebly.

"It is mine," repeated Beatrice. "I am its mother. Do I speak clearly enough? That

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boy is my son. I bore him in marriage, but in trouble and in secrecy. Now will you or your husband dare to lay claim to him—dare to swear it belongs to you? Answer me!"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear, dear!" ejaculated Mrs. Rawlings. Beatrice's face was pale as death. She breathed quickly, as one in pain. Now, that her hand was forced, now that the guarded secret of her life was wrested from her, she seemed to speak like one who, having told the worst, cares little what follows.

"Save myself and one other no one knows of its birth. I loved it and longed to have it ever with me. But for years I scarcely dared to see it. Then came a chance. I schemed so that it might come to me and be always with me, and yet no one need know it was my very own. I injured no one by so doing. I had my child and could love it and care for it. I was all but happy. And now, for what can be of no benefit to you, you will force me to tell my tale to the world or part with my child. Yet you are a woman, and must have a woman's heart!"

She looked at Mrs. Rawlings and saw that tears were in her eyes.

"I believe you are kind," continued Beatrice in a softer voice. "You have forced me to tell you all. But I believe you will keep my secret and help me to keep it." She did not mean to sue, nevertheless there was an imploring tone in her voice. Mrs. Rawlings clasped her plump hands together; the tears streamed down her cheeks. In spite of years of practice in plaiting up those mysterious white integuments whose fanciful shapes adorn shops where pork is sold, the worthy woman was still humane at heart.

"Oh, my poor young lady! My poor young lady!" she cried. "You so young, so proud-looking, so beautiful! To be led astray! Oh, dear! oh dear! What villains men are, both high and low!"

Miss Clauson flushed to the roots of her hair. She seemed about to speak, but checked herself. "You are satisfied now?" she asked after a pause.

"Oh, yes, miss. Oh, I am so sorry for you. You were right to trust me. Not a word shall pass my lips."

"But your husband?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! I must do the best I can. I must tell him it is not ours. He will be so unhappy. He's a good man and a kind husband, but rather excitable. I assure you, miss, he was fully convinced that sweet little boy was his. I own I wasn't, but I humored him, seeing the thought made him so happy. Anyway I would have loved the boy like my own. Now I promise you there shall be no more trouble. But my poor man, he will be disappointed."

"Will any sum of money——" began Beatrice rather timidly.

"Oh, no, miss. Although Rawlings has neglected business dreadfully for the last two years, and his brother is grumbling, we are fairly well-to-do people with a tidy bit saved. Oh, no, my man is single-eyed. He only wanted his boy."

"How was your child lost?" asked Beatrice.

Mrs. Rawlings looked rather confused. "I can't help believing, miss, that the poor little fellow was drowned and never found. But Rawlings he won't have it so. He says he was stolen and we shall find him some day."

After this Miss Clauson thanked her hostess with grave dignity. Then she dropped her veil and attended by Mrs. Rawlings went back to the cab and Sylvanus. She had gained her end, but at a price only known to herself. What it had cost her to reveal the secret of her life to that strange woman can scarcely be over estimated. Such was her feeling of degradation that she almost wished that her uncles had been in the room when yesterday she went with the child in her hand to tell them what she had to-day told Mrs. Rawlings. "And after all," she murmured with a bitter smile on her face, "it is but staving off the crash which must come sooner or later." Here she sighed involuntarily. Mordle's quick ear caught the sound. "Nothing unpleasant happened, I hope?" he asked.

"My business was not of the pleasantest nature, but I accomplished it successfully," replied Beatrice.

He said no more. By her desire she was set down at one of the principal shops in Blacktown, an emporium of articles of feminine need into which Mordle could not venture to accompany her. She thanked him for his services, and he knew that those thanks were a dismissal. He strode back to Oakbury looking very thoughtful; indeed it was not until he was well into his own parish that he remembered the necessity of resuming his usual cheerful air. "It must have been charitable," he muttered. "But why the secrecy? Why the 'Cat and Compasses?'"

Saturday came. All that morning, the busiest of the week, Horace and Herbert were fidgety and uncomfortable. Long before the hour fixed by Messrs. Blackett & Wiggens for the appearance of their client's carriage the brothers were glancing down the drive. Miss Clauson, however, appeared calm and at her ease. Her woman's instinct told her that all danger from the claimants was at an end. About 3 o'clock Horace turned to her. "My dear," he said, "has Mrs. Miller made any preparation for the child's departure?"

"None whatever. He will not be sent for. It was but an idle threat."

Horace and Herbert exchanged glances. They knew it was no idle threat, but they little knew how the fulfillment had been averted.

Three o'clock came—four—five o'clock, but no carriage, no Rawlings, no Blackett, no Wiggens. Sunday, Monday and Tuesday passed without any sign or manifestation of hostility. The Talberts were then bound to confess that their niece had judged aright.

"Beatrice appears to be remarkably clear sighted," said Horace.

"Remarkably so," answered Herbert.

But had Sylvanus Mordle, who spent the evening with them, committed a breach of faith and mentioned his excursion with Miss Clauson, the brothers might have suspected they had credited their niece with a quality to which she had no title.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SWEETS OF LIBERTY.

"O Liberty! thou goddess heavenly bright! Profuse of bliss and pregnant with delight." Every bard has sung the joys of Liberty; every writer has said his say upon her glories. Patriots have died for her, and statesmen—modern ones especially—have made her a convenient stalking horse. The subject being such a stock one, and apt quotations so plentiful, there is no need to dilate upon the frame of mind in which Mrs. Miller's acquaintance, Mr. Maurice Hervey, late No. 1080, found himself, when Portland prison at length discontinued its ungrudging and machine-like hospitality and restored him to the outer world, a free man save for the formality of once a month reporting himself to the police, and that general suspicious surveillance which is so irksome to the usually modest and retiring nature of a ticket-of-leave man.

The "goddess heavenly bright" showed her face, the first time for some years, to Maurice Hervey on the very day when Miss Clauson and Sylvanus Mordle went to Blacktown.

Mrs. Miller, who had manifested so keen an interest in the felon's enlodgement, remained in complete ignorance of the happy event. This was due to no omission on her part. She had written twice to the governor of Portland, begging that the date of the convict's release might be made known to her. The letters were dated not from Oakbury, but from some place in London. The first letter was duly acknowledged, and the information vouchsafed that the date could not be exactly fixed. To the second letter she received no reply. The reason for such apparent discourtesy was this:

The day of the man's emancipation was drawing very near, so he was told that his friend had written, and he was asked if he wished to be sent to London to meet her. He cast down his eyes and in a respectful way stated that he was sorry to say that he attributed his present shameful position to certain evil counsel which the writer had given him, and which he had followed. He did wish to be sent to London, but would rather avoid this woman than seek her. After this avowal Mrs. Miller's letter remained unanswered.

He was an educated villain, who had been sentenced to five years' penal servitude for uttering forged bills. Like most such men, who are sent into seclusion for the good of the community, Maurice Hervey was able to realize, without such severe treatment as was needed to convince the Apostle Paul, that kicking against pricks is foolishness. He had been ordered to pay a certain debt. Misbehavior meant that the debt would be exacted to the uttermost farthing; whereas good conduct would in time lighten the obligation and induce his creditor to accept a handsome composition. So he did to the best of his ability such work as was allotted to him. He was too clever to attempt the elbow-worn trick of interesting the chaplain by a pretended conversion. He sagely reflected that chaplains must by this time have grown wide awake. But he wore a contented, inoffensive look, spoke civilly to his jailers, complained of nothing, and gave no trouble. It was only in the seclusion of his circumscribed cell of corrugated iron that No. 1080 scowled, grated his teeth and clenched his hands. It was only there that while his heart craved for personal freedom his lips noiselessly framed bitter curses and vows of vengeance.

So it is that if upon his return to freedom Mr. Hervey had given his experiences of penal servitude to the daily papers, his description of the punishment of bread and water diet, dark cells, and that humiliating exercise with the crank known as "grinding the air" would have had no first-hand value.

Before leaving Portland he was told that the "Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society" would doubtless do something for him. He expressed his gratitude for the information, but added that unless from disuse his right hand had lost its cunning, he could earn an honest—he emphasized the word—livelihood without difficulty. He had been an artist, and could again pursue that craft under a new name. During his detention he had given his janitors proof of his graphic abilities by the graving of sundry slates with complicated and not inartistic designs. These works of art are still shown to visitors to the prison as curiosities.

So, practically a free man, Maurice Hervey stood in the streets of London at 4 o'clock on the second day of the new year. There was little about him to attract attention. By a merciful and sensible dispensation, during the three months prior to his emancipation a convict's hair is left to nature, so that in these days of military crops Mr. Hervey's head, which no longer resembled a Fitzroy stormdrum, was not a signal of danger. The suit of clothes which replaced the durable prison dress was rough and ill-fitting, but not such as to create remark. In London that night there must have been hundreds of thousands of respectable men who looked neither better nor worse than Maurice Hervey.

Free at last! Free to turn where he liked, and, within the limits of the law, do as he liked; in splendid health; in the prime of manhood. Free to redeem or cancel the past by honest work, or by dishonesty sink lower and lower in the future. In his pocket the sum of five pounds seventeen shillings and sixpence, the result of years of self-enforced good conduct and unavoidable hard labor. The fingering of this money gave him a new, or at least awoke a dormant sensation. It was more than four years since his hands had touched a coin of the realm. Think of that and realize what penal servitude means!

The first use he made of his liberty and money was characteristic, and I fear may awaken indulgent sympathy in the minds of the majority of man- (not woman-) kind. He went into a tobacconist's and bought a sixpenny cigar. He lit it, sat down upon a chair in the shop and for some minutes smoked in blissful, contented silence. The shopkeeper eyed his customer narrowly. His general appearance, especially the look of his hands, did not seem compatible with what the tradesman called a "sixpenny smoke gent." Hervey caught the man's eyes fixed on his hands. He himself glanced at them with a look of disgust and a muttered curse. Years of turf-carrying and digging and delving for Portland stone play havoc with a gentleman's hands. Hervey's nails were broken, blunted and stunted; his fingers were thickened and hardened. Altogether his hands were such as a person solicitous as to the refinement of his personal appearance would prefer to keep in his pockets.

There were other actions which showed the ticket-of-leave man to be possessed of a fastidious nature. The first enthralling solemnity of the refound enjoyment of good tobacco having passed off, he left the shop and went in search of a ready-made clothing establishment. Here he bought a shirt and collar, a pair of shining boots, a hat, gloves, and a cheap suit which for a few days would hang together and present an appearance almost fashionable. He asked permission to change his apparel on the premises. Then having had a brown paper parcel made of the suit presented to him by a generous government he went his way, no doubt much relieved by the amelioration of his external condition.

After a few more purchases needed by a gentleman for his toilet, he found his money had dwindled down to very little. He had, however, enough left to buy a shiny black bag. Into this he tumbled his parcels, and hailing a hansom paid his last shilling to be conveyed to the door of a well-known hotel. A luxurious dog this convict!

He engaged a bedroom. He ordered a dinner of which even Horace and Herbert might have approved. He rang for hot water, and spent half an hour soaking his hardened and disfigured hands. He scowled as he realised the painful fact that hundreds of gallons of hot water and months of time must be expended before these badly-used members in any way resumed their original appearance. Then, without a shilling in his pocket, he went to his dinner, with which he

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drank a bottle of champagne. It is clear that Mr. Hervey, late 1080, had liberal views as to the treatment due to himself. He had, moreover, a lot of leeway to make up.

He spent the evening smoking the hotel cigars and drinking the hotel whisky and water. Pleasant as these occupations were, he retired to rest early. While he had been soaking his hands he had cast longing eyes upon the beauties of the white-covered bed, and had mentally contrasted its soft charms with the asperities of the strip of sacking which had for so long been his resting-place. Sweet, truly sweet, are the uses of adversity when they teach a man to enjoy the simple comforts of life as Maurice Hervey that night enjoyed his bed. He reveled in the clean white sheets, he nestled on the soft mattress and yet softer pillows. The profusion of blankets filled his soul with a rapturous warmth. And as he fully realized the contrast between the innocent luxury he was enjoying and the discomforts of an iron cell eight feet by four, he vowed a very proper vow; that no ill-advised conduct of his own should force him to renew his acquaintance with prison fare and discipline. The love of luxury has saved many a man from going wrong.

"Besides," he murmured, as he sank off to sleep, "there is no need for foolery of that kind. I am master of the situation. I can eat, drink and be merry for the rest of my life." There are many men who would keep the sounder had they such a thought to rock them.

In the morning, after breakfast, it occurred to Hervey that a moneyless man staying at a hotel is in a rather precarious position. Pleasant as was his newly-found liberty, there was work to be done before he could with a clear conscience enjoy it. So he sallied forth, trudged through a number of streets, and at last reached a quiet back road full of unpretending little houses. At one of these houses he inquired for a Miss Martin, who had lodged there some four or five years ago. Miss Martin, he was informed, had left over so long—left without giving an address. Hervey's heart grew sick. In his haste to once more taste the luxuries of life he had been too precipitate. He knew that unless he could find the person he wanted it would have been better for him to have kept his good conduct money intact.

The woman of the house, who noticed his dismay, added that the shop at the corner might know what had become of Miss Martin; so to the shop he went. He was in luck. He learned that his friend lived about a mile away; moreover, that she was now Mrs. Humphrays. As he heard this supplementary piece of news the man laughed so curiously that the shopwoman eyed him askance.

He walked to the new address, that of another little house in another quiet street. He knocked. A good-looking, respectable young woman, carrying a baby, and followed by a toddling child, opened the door. She gave a low cry, and staggered back against the wall. Hervey raised his hat with mock politeness, and without invitation entered the house. The woman called to some one, who came and relieved her of her children. She then opened the door of a sitting-room, into which she followed her visitor. Hervey threw himself on a chair, and looked at the woman with a satirical smile. As yet not a word had passed between them. The man was the first to break silence.

"Well, Fanny," he said mockingly, "so you are married, and have forgotten me?"

"No; I am trying to forget you." She spoke bitterly.

"And you can't. That's a compliment, considering the years of separation."

The woman looked at him in the face. "Maurice," she said, "I am married. I married a kind, true man, who loves me, and works for me and for our children. He know a great deal, not all about my past, yet he took me and trusts me. You will sneer when I tell you I am trying to be a good woman and a good wife. You always sneered at anything good. But, Maurice, for the sake of what we were once to each other, spare me now. Let me live in peace, and see you no more."

She spoke in solemn earnest, such earnestness that the man's light laugh seemed discordant. "My dear girl," he said, "I have no wish to tempt your feet from the paths of domestic virtue—no wish to harm you. I have finer fish to fry. But you may remember that when certain circumstances rendered it imperative—curse it! I can speak plainly to you—when I learned that the warrant was out, when I knew that the game was up, I placed a little packet in your fond hands to keep until better times. Where is it?"

The woman flushed, and for a moment did not answer. Her prayer for mercy had been genuine; her wish to see him no more an honest utterance; but years ago she had given this man all a woman has to give—given it without consideration, without price. And now, so far as he was concerned the only memory of the past which linked them together was but of a certain thing left in her charge.

He saw the flush, he saw the hesitation, and, of course, attributed both to the wrong motive. His brow grew black. "By G—d!" he cried; "if it is not forthcoming——"

She burst into tears. "Wait," she said, quitting the room abruptly, and leaving her visitor in dire suspense. In a few minutes she returned and handed him a small sealed packet.

"There it is—just as you gave it to me that night," she said. "Many a time when I've been hard pressed, and did not know where to turn to for a shilling, I tried to persuade myself that you meant me to use it in case of need. But I knew you too well, Maurice—I knew you too well!"

Hervey paid no heed to her last words, the scorn conveyed by which should have brought the blood to the cheek of any man of decent feelings. He tore the parcel open. It contained a gold watch and chain, two valuable diamond rings and about a hundred sovereigns. He placed the watch in his fob, then tried to draw the rings on his fingers. Neither would pass over his enlarged knuckles, so with a curse he shoveled them along with the gold, into his pocket. The woman watched him sadly.

"Thank you, my dear," he said airily. "I knew I could trust you. By the by, perhaps you're hard up. Have some—I can get plenty more." He held out some gold to her.

"Not a farthing. Your gold would burn me."

"Will you give me a kiss for the sake of old times? Fancy! it is more than four years since my lips have touched a woman's."

She made an emphatic gesture of dissent. "It would be well for some women," she said, "if your lips had never touched theirs."

He laughed an unpleasant laugh. "Well, good-bye then, if we are not to rake up old fires. Remember me to your respectable husband. Keep yourself unspotted from the world, and train up your children in the way they should go. Farewell."

He swung out of the house whistling a merry tune in vogue when his incarceration began. "Now," he said, "that I have money enough to last a long time, I can make my own terms. Grim want won't push me into a corner. Now, you jade, I'll make you bend your proud knees!"

He grated his strong teeth and stamped his foot—the latter so violently and viciously that a timid old gentleman who was close by him started off at an accelerated pace in the direction of a distant policeman.

Hervey hung about London for a few days. He made considerable additions to his wardrobe, was an excellent customer of the hotel, he patronized several theatres, and generally enjoyed himself. He was not altogether idle, part of his time being taken up in making a series of inquiries which it took some trouble to get answered. At last he learned what he wanted to know. "So near!" he muttered. "I feared I should have to look out of England." Forthwith he paid his hotel bill, and, carrying with him the respect of the proprietor, left the house. Evening found him in comfortable quarters in the smoky old city known as Blacktown.

CHAPTER XIX.

"IT HAS COME."

At Blacktown Maurice Hervey did not favor a hotel with his custom. Perhaps he mistrusted the capabilities possessed by the Blacktown hotels for furnishing him with luxuries such as, after so protracted and enforced an abstention, he felt to be rightly his due. Perhaps he sighed for the quietude and repose with which one usually associates a private house. After a short search he found a bedroom and a sitting-room, well furnished and commanding extensive views. They were in one of a row of substantial houses which by some freak of fortune had fallen from the high estate of fashionable residences to the lower level of respectable lodging houses. The landlady's quotation, which, after the manner of such quotations, had attached to it a string of extras like the tail to a kite, having been accepted, Mr. Hervey requested that some dinner might be prepared for him. This of course meant chops—an extemporized lodging house dinner invariably means chops. Having particularly requested that his chops should be broiled, not fried, Mr. Hervey, whilst the cooking was going on, went out, found a wine merchant's and ordered half-a-dozen of whisky sent in. The sight of the bottles, the number of which augured well for a long stay, gladdened the landlady's heart. By the aid of the whisky, a kettle of hot water, sugar, and cigars the new lodger spent a comfortable, if not an intellectual or improving evening.

In the morning he sallied forth. Like every visitor to the old city who has time to spare he seemed bent upon seeing the natural beauties of the suburbs of Blacktown. His landlady, who thought him a nice, pleasant, free-spoken gentleman, gave him an oral list of the stock sights in the vicinity; but as soon as he was out of doors Mr. Hervey inquired the way to Oakbury, and learned that an easy walk of about two miles would take him to that highly favored spot. The weather, although fine, was cold, so he decided to walk to his destination. He soon left the rows of houses and shops behind him, struck along a broad white road which cut its way through a level greensward, and in about three-quarters of an hour found himself in front of the Red Lion Inn, Oakbury.

He entered the inn—men of his stamp, when in the country, make entering inns a point of honor. He called for hot brandy and water, and was supplied with a jorum of that deep brown liquor, dear to rustic palates on account of its presumed strength. Hervey sipped it, lit a cigar and entered into a cheerful conversation with the Red Lion and

Hervey enters into conversation with the Red Lion.

Lioness, who were pursuing their calling in what, after the fashion of country inns, was a combination of bar and parlor. The Red Lion, an affable, condescending animal, and, like all noble animals, willing to relinquish toil for more congenial pursuits, seeing that his visitor was ready to talk, sat down in a round-backed chair near the fire and left the Lioness to attend to the bottle and jug department, which, as the hour was just past noon, was in full swing of activity.

Hervey asked a variety of questions about the neighborhood. He might really have been a gentleman of fortune anxious to buy a place and so properly particular as to what society might be round about. He obtained much valuable and interesting information about the "families of position" as they appeared to the eyes of the Red Lion. He learned who lived in the big white house at the edge of the common, who in the house at the top of the hill, who in the house at the bottom. He was gradually leading up to the questions he wanted to ask, when the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and the Lion after glancing over the wire window-blind laid down his pipe and went to the door. Hervey also glanced out of window and saw two tall gentlemen, who occupied the box-seats of a large wagonette. They were talking gravely and sadly to the Lion, who, whilst he listened with due respect, looked somewhat crestfallen and ill at ease.

"What's the matter now, Joe?" asked the Lioness, rather anxiously, as her spouse returned.

"Say the last cask o' beer ran out two days before its time, so couldn't have been full. They look after trifles, they do."

"Oh, nonsense!" said the Lioness, tossing her head. "Some one must have got at it. Their servants are no better than others."

"Who are they?" asked Hervey.

"The Mr. Talberts of Hazlewood House," replied the landlady, with that smile on her face which seemed to come involuntarily on the faces of many people when they mentioned or heard the name of our gentle Horace and Herbert.

Hervey went hastily to the window and looked after the wagonette, which, however, was by now out of sight.

"Rich men, I suppose?" he said, reseating himself.

"They're rich enough; but oh, that particular!" said the Lioness, with another toss of her head. The accusation of short measure rankled in her breast.

"Close-fisted?" asked Hervey.

"Well, yes, they're close," said the Lion. "That is, they like to get a shilling's worth for a shilling."

"We all like that. Let me have it now. Two brandies—one for you and one for me."

The Lion laughed and filled the glasses. Hervey adroitly plied him with questions about the Talberts, and soon learnt almost as much as we know. He laughed with the landlord at their amiable peculiarities. It was well our friends did not hear the Red Lion, or Hazelwood House might have gone elsewhere for its beer.

"They are funny gents," said the Lion. "You'd never believe; but a day or two ago I was walking along the road. It was drizzling with rain. The Mr. Talberts they passed me, driving. All of a sudden they pull up at the hedge round their paddock. Mr. Herbert he jumps down; he takes the whip and with the handle begins poking furiously in the hedge. I ran up thinking something was the matter. Law no! not it. He was a poking at a bit of white paper which had blown in there. Poke and poke he did till he got it out—and Mr. Horace the while holding the horses and sitting and looking on as if it meant life or death getting out that paper. Rum thing to be so particular, ain't it?"

Hervey professed himself much amused and continued his questions. He heard all about Miss Clauson, the niece who had been staying at Oakbury for so long. He even learned the name of every member of the Hazlewood House establishment, from that of the oldest retainer, Whittaker, to that of the latest arrival, Mrs. Miller the nurse. He heard, of course, the whole history, with additions, of the mysteriously-sent boy. And when he was told this, in spite of his self-control, a look of utter amazement spread over his face. He rose, and bade the Red Lion good day. The story he had heard must have engrossed his mind to an unprecedented extent, for he actually forgot to finish his brandy and water, a flattering tribute to the landlord's power of interesting a listener.

After leaving the inn Hervey took the first turning out of the main road. It was a little by-way leading to nowhere in particular. Here, as no onlookers were about, he gave vent to delight by sundry actions common to most men as soon as they find themselves alone after having received the best possible news. He smacked his thigh; he rubbed his hands together; he seemed to hug himself in his joy. He laughed aloud, but there was a cruel ring in his laugh, and there was a cruel look on his laughing mouth. His eyes brightened with the blended lights of malice and anticipated triumph.

"What luck!" he ejaculated. "What luck! I see it all from the very beginning. Cool—found it! it was a clever stroke. By G—d! I've got her now! I've got her now!"

He calmed himself, returned to the main road and inquired the way to Hazlewood House. He stood for some time in front of the entrance gates, but finding that only the chimneys of the house could be seen from this point he walked round until he could get a better idea of the building. "It all means money! Pots of money!" he said, with glee. After this he returned to the gates, and it seemed as if he meant to favor our friends with a call. However, if so, he changed his mind.

"No," he said, turning away. "There's a new element in the case which must be considered. No need to be in a hurry. I'll go back home and think it all out over a pipe."

So he faced about, and, in a thoughtful way, sauntered down the lane, or road, whose mission in this world is to give access to Hazlewood House and two or three other equally desirable residences.

It was a glorious winter's day. The sun was shining brightly; so brightly that on the bare twigs of the hedges the hoar frost of the night had resolved itself into crystal drops which shone like jewels, and then, as if alarmed at their Protean nature, trembled and fell. Although a silvery haze hung round the horizon there was no fog. The air was sharp and crisp, but not damp. The wind if cold was quiet. It was a day of a thousand—a day, in fact, on which, if she knows her business, a woman who has charge of a child takes it out for a good long walk.

Mrs. Miller knew her business, so it was quite in order that as Maurice Hervey was walking down the lane the nurse and the boy, on their way home to early dinner, should be walking up. Hervey, whilst deep in his meditations, heard a voice, and looking up saw the dark clad woman and the golden-haired child within a few paces of him. He stopped short and looked at them.

Hervey to-day presented an appearance so different from that of the caged creature seen by Mrs. Miller at Portland that she would probably have passed him without recognition. He was now fashionably dressed and had it suited his purpose, might have brushed elbows with the woman and yet left her ignorant of his release. This not being his purpose he stopped short and waited. Naturally she raised her eyes and at once knew the truth.

Had Sarah Miller followed the impulse which seized her when she saw that face, full of mocking triumph, she would have uttered a cry of anguish. Only the fear of alarming the child prevented her from so doing. As it was she gave a quick gasp, and for a moment gazed at the man as if she saw a ghost. Then she stooped and said to the boy: "Run on, my pretty, run as fast as you can." The boy obeyed. Hervey made no effort to stop him, but he turned and followed him with his eyes. Then once more he faced Mrs. Miller.

She had by now recovered from the first shock, and looked at him not so much with fear as with hatred and defiance. She took a few steps, passed him, and placed herself as if to bar the way to Hazlewood House.

"What are you doing here?" she asked fiercely.

"My dear Sarah," said the man in mocking tones, "what a strange question to ask! Considering your anxiety to appoint the earliest day possible for our meeting, is it any wonder that I come at once to find you?"

"Now you've found me, what do you want?"

"My poor Sarah, can't you guess. When you paid me that friendly visit last summer I told you what I pined for. I have come to you in order to find some one else."

"She is hundreds of miles from here. You'll never see her again."

Even as she told the lie her heart sank. The gleam in Hervey's eyes showed her she had lied in vain. He laughed like one enjoying the situation. "Never see her again!" he echoed. "I am inconsolable. But chance meetings do sometimes occur. You don't mean to give or sell me any information, I suppose?"

"I'd cut my tongue out first."

"Oh, true and faithful servant! Then it's no good asking. But about yourself. Sarah—have you got a good place in the neighborhood?"

"That's none of your business," said Mrs. Miller, sharply. Hervey laughed again.

"I should like to hear you had a nice comfortable place. Something easy and suited to your declining years. You have not worn well, my dear Sarah. You look at least twenty years older than when I first knew you."

She took no notice of the taunt. Again the man laughed his mocking laugh. "What kind of a place is yours, Sarah? As you know, I am much interested in you. You are a nurse, I suppose?" He nodded in the direction of the boy who stood some little distance off wondering in his childish way what his guardian was about with this gentleman.

"Yes, I am a nurse," said Mrs. Miller lonely.

"And that is one of your charges, youngest perhaps? A fine little fellow you know I have often dreamed of such a boy as that. At heart I believe the germs of respectability and domestic goodness. What do you think, Sarah?"

"Your heart is as black as a coal," burst out the woman excitedly. "Would to God you had died in prison. For years it has been my daily prayer."

"Yet it availed nothing—the prayer of the righteous! Something gone wrong above, Sarah. Never mind, I give you good wishes in return for evil ones. I know something of this neighborhood and the people, and if I could choose a place for you it would be one with two middle-aged gentlemen named Talbert, who live at Hazlewood House with a beautiful unmarried niece named Beatrice Clauson. That would be such a comfortable place for you, Sarah!"

Until now he had been playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse. There was nothing to show her the extent of his knowledge. For all she knew he might simply have come down here to find her. So she had guarded every word, every look, fearing lest she might give him information. But he bared his claws and showed her that escape was impossible. She groaned and struggled no more.

"You will take money?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Sarah, I'll take money."

"And go away and trouble no more. Tell me where to find you to-morrow. I will come and arrange everything."

"Oh, no, you won't. I never deal with agents. Your intervention is not needed, Sarah."

She stamped her foot angrily.

"Tell me what you want," she exclaimed, "or leave me and go and do your worst. You may have men to deal with now, not women."

He threw off in a second every trace of mockery. He seized her wrist and held her. His eyes shone fiercely into hers. "Listen, you hag, you cat!" he said. "All your part in this business is to take a message. Go straight to her. Tell her I am here, free, and with a pocketful of money. Tell her to come to me to-morrow at my rooms. Tell her I will wait until twelve o'clock. If she is not there when the clock strikes I swear I will come and see her in her own home. Do you understand? Answer me."

"Yes, I understand."

"Here's the address." He scribbled on a bit of paper. "Now you can go back to